

INTRODUCTION:

Imagine this: *You're having a picnic with your family at a nice park such as Tygum Lake. Everything is fine – the weather, the food, the family. Everyone is enjoying themselves. But suddenly.... A long bearded man wearing a hairy coat and chewing on some grasshoppers comes toward you and yells, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!" What would you do? Would you listen to him or run from him thinking he's crazy?*

Today I want to speak to you a message I'll call, "A Man Sent From God". We will take a detailed look at a man called, 'John, the Baptizer', and I find the basis for this in the gospel according to John, chapter 1. **READ TEXT: JOHN 1:6-8, 15, 19-34**

Let me first tell you about another man, perhaps you've never heard of him. More than 500 years ago, in the little village of Ferrara, Italy, a baby boy was born into a noble family. His parents named him Girolamo Savonarola. Little did his parents realise that their baby would grow up to be a man sent from God.

From his earliest years, this keen, intelligent boy possessed an unusual love for God. By his own testimony, he was prepared to abandon life itself for the glory of Christ. As he grew, his life was a mixture of loneliness and ruggedness. He deprived himself of every indulgence. Instead of the 'leather sofas', he chose the hardest couch. Instead of 'microfibre suits', he wore plain garments. Instead of 'meals at fine restaurants', he ate only basic foods.

He lived in a period characterised by widespread corruption and wickedness in the established church. The Catholic offices of bishop and cardinal were up for sale to the highest bidder. Shameless immorality in its grossest forms was prevalent in monasteries and convents, and the local congregations. The church had become a den of vice and iniquity.

The young priest, Savonarola, was so burdened by what he saw that he spoke out, with fiery indignation, against these practices. For 8 years he preached in Florence, Italy, pleading for purity of life and simplicity of worship. However, the established clergy resented him and he was publicly assaulted by the officials of the church. He was different to them. He didn't fit in with the rest of them. What was unusual was that 10-12,000 people would flock to hear what Savonarola had to say. So powerful were his words that he caused what was called 'a bonfire of vanities', where people would bring all their trinkets, obscene material, and pagan idolatrous items to be burnt in the town square. When this happened, this was the last straw for the church leaders.

So, during one of his devotion times, they broke into his monastery, dragged him into the streets, and locked him away in a dirty, dark dungeon. And there they tortured him for weeks. Finally, the day of his trial came. The church leaders were so determined to destroy him that one of the pope's commissioners wrote: "Put Savonarola to death, even if he were another John the Baptist". In fact, this commissioner said, "Savonarola, I separate you from the church militant, and the church triumphant." Savonarola replied, "From the church militant, yes, but you cannot separate me from the church triumphant." And then they hanged him, set fire to his corpse, and threw his ashes into the river Arno.

Those of you who know your church history, will know the importance Savonarola had on the Reformation. In him we find a perfect parallel to John the Baptist. He was a man sent from God to Italy, just as John the Baptist was a man sent from God to Israel. Both lived modestly and yet preached mightily. Savonarola for the Reformation, John the Baptist for the kingdom of God. Now let's turn our attention to this man the Bible calls John and learn from him. Most of us have a vague view of who John the Baptist really was – sure you could tell me what he did, but could you tell me what he was like as a person?

1. THE BACKGROUND OF THE MAN SENT FROM GOD

We know his parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth, both elderly people whom God graciously surprised with a baby. Dr Luke tells us in his gospel that from a young age until the day of his public ministry, he lived in the desert wilderness. Not just living on the outer-edge of suburbia, but in a real wilderness. We're told he got used to eating real rough – things such as locusts and wild honey, possibly because he couldn't find too much else.

In the cold solitude of the desert, where he was all alone, he got his message from God. It was in the wilderness that God was able to fill him with Himself. John was totally devoted to God in everything – and Savonarola was just like him. In the wilderness, God was preparing John. Matthew records John's very first sermon as, "You Brood of Vipers!" Let me tell you something, you don't make too many friends when you preach like that. This isn't the type of advice Dale Carnegie gives in his book, 'How to win friends and influence people'. But John was directing this word directly to the misleading religious leaders of the day. He had a fire-and-brimstone message that was a call to repentance in order to prepare the way for Jesus.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MAN SENT FROM GOD

So let's take a closer look at John and see the characteristics of a man of God.

- A. He was human, but not ordinary.** In **John 1:6** we are introduced to this extraordinary man. Although he was no angel, no spark of divinity – he was just a man. There was nothing super-significant about his name, unlike the names Immanuel and Jesus that are loaded with meaning. He was just 'John' in a plain brown wrapper...but he was not just ordinary. Although he had the most common of names, he himself was the most uncommon of men. And when I say 'not ordinary', I mean it in the sense of 'not mediocre or average'. It says that he was 'sent by God' – that means 'commissioned' by the Almighty.

That means he stood virtually alone and didn't fit into any preformed mould. He was neither Pharisee nor Sadducee nor priest nor Levite nor scribe. He didn't sound like a preacher... but he didn't smell like a saint either! He was human, but he wasn't ordinary. And this is one of the first characteristics of a man or woman of God – they are not just like everyone else, they are not just 'one of the boys'. They've been set apart with God's call on their lives to be different from this world. Have you been called to be different from this world?

- B. He was a lamp, but not the light.** **Verse 7** tells us precisely why John came – to be a witness with this one goal: to turn people around so they could see the Light. How simple. How true.

How often do people, when they get together, want to talk about themselves rather than others in a good sense? Almost always. People want to brag about their achievements, their successes, their intelligence, and their plans. What we need are not more people who will talk about themselves, but more who will rather talk, testify, or be witnesses about someone else – namely Christ.

John's office was not a position embellished with pomp and ceremony, he was no religious dignitary or published theologian. He was simply a beggar telling other beggars where to find bread, as **verse 8** indicates. He was a lamp, but not the light. He was a wick, but not the flame. We are told that the 'true light' that enlightens every man was Jesus (v9). John had no problem with this and never claimed to be the light. He saw Himself in the shadow of the Saviour (v15). A few weeks ago I spoke to you about the eternality of Christ, His deity. John understood this and pointed everyone to the greatness of Jesus.

Here's an interesting thought: Most of us have had a variety of lamps in our homes over the years – desk lamps, bankers' lamps, chandeliers. Some have been fancy, made from brass or silver or glass. Some may have been very common, like a simple porcelain fixture. Whatever it is, the important thing is the light... not the lamp itself. It's the brightness of the bulb that lights up a room, not the shine on the brass. So, are you exhibiting Christ in your life as the true Light of the world, or is the decoration of your lamp the main thing people see? Is His light radiating through your life, or is it being obstructed by a cumbersome lampshade of sin?

- C. **He was a voice, but not the Word.** Have you ever noticed how some people can be a real puzzle or a strange enigma to work out? To the religious people in Jerusalem, John was such a puzzle for them. So they sent out some people to him. They said, *"There's some crazy guy out there at Bethany, he's poppin' locusts and is dressed like a hippie. He's definitely a loony but our temples are emptying out because all the people are goin' to him! Find out who he is!"*

In verses 19-23, John replies, "I'm nothing but a voice." Like the relationship between a singer's voice and the song's lyrics, John was simply a voice, while Jesus was the actually Word of God. It said John came 'to make straight the way for the Lord' – what does that mean? It comes from Isaiah 40 and the imagery is from when there were no paved roads, only dirt tracks across the fields. If a king were to travel, the road must be built and smoothed out that the royal chariot might not find the travelling too rough or muddy. Not only that, with a way made straight, the people could get a real view of the king. In the same way, John paved the path for the Messiah.

And what's a voice? Nothing more than a vehicle. When someone speaks, they may stop, but what they say will remain. The voice can stop but the word lingers. Our sights are very short if we are attracted to a voice or a lamp, rather than the Word of God.

- D. **He was useful, but not indispensable.** Verses 25-28 displays John's humility, especially verse 27. It says how slaves would untie their master's sandals – have you ever untied your boss' shoelaces? John was willing to stoop to the lowest level of servitude in submission to the Messiah. This really was a mark of his level of humility – he knew he was useful to God, but he also knew that he could be replaced.

Someone once said, "A man is most useful if he attaches his listener's affection to Christ, and not to himself." And the same goes for the pulpit – it doesn't revolve around the preacher, but solely around Jesus Christ. John, though he was becoming popular, he refused to be idolised and continued pointing to Christ. Samuel Chadwick was an old Methodist preacher who said, "If you are successful, don't crow. If you are a failure, don't croak!" And I want you to appreciate this in John – he never crowed. He never considered himself as a somebody who was indispensable. What about you? Do you realise that while you are useful to the Lord, if your ministry is not marked by humility, you can always be replaced? We are all indispensable.

- E. **He was a witness, but not an object of worship.** And I just love verses 29-34, where John says, "Aah look, there He is – my competition!" No... of course he doesn't say that. John was never threatened of competition by no means, but instead pushed all the focus upon the Lord. Does competition threaten you? Are you agitated when others come into the limelight? John's whole ministry was to make known the Christ. He didn't want to receive any glory – he wanted to give it all to Christ.

In John 3:30 we see the philosophy that John lived by. So does that mean that John had a useless ministry. No way! He had a very balanced ministry. The voice made ready the way of the Word. The confronter of sins heralded the One who takes all sin away. The man sent from God bowed down to the man who was God. The forerunner revealed the One he was running before. The water-baptizer pointed to the Spirit-baptizer. And finally, this priest's son testified that Jesus was indeed the very Son of God. In all this, we see that John was witness of all this, but never an object of worship.

3. MARKS OF PEOPLE SENT FROM GOD TODAY

And so, these are the characteristics of John, the man sent from God:

- He was human, but not ordinary
- He was a lamp, but not the light
- He was a voice, but not the Word
- He was useful, but not indispensable
- He was a witness, but not an object of worship

In short, the true qualities of people sent by God are that they will exalt the One who sent them, and they will diminish the one who is sent. Those truly sent from God are terribly uncomfortable when honoured and flattered.

An old hymnwriter, Elizabeth Klephane, wrote a hymn ending with these lines:

I take, O cross, thy shadow from my abiding place

I ask no other sunshine, than the sunshine of His face

Content to let the world go by, Content to know no gain no loss

My sinful self, my only shame, my glory, all the cross

CONCLUSION

And so to finish, let me relate an incredible experience Savonarola had when he went from Genoa to Florence. Believing that God had sent him to minister to the corrupt San Marco monastery, he journeyed there only to collapse with fatigue at the base of the mountain range that led to the monastery. Despairing of life, Savonarola was visited by a stranger. Its unknown whether the stranger was real or a vision or an angel. But the story has it that the visitor fed the discouraged traveller, gave him rest, and encourage him. The stranger helped Savonarola reach the gate of the monastery. Once there, the stranger is reported to have said, "And now, Savonarola, remember to do that for which God has sent you"... and then he left. At that, Savonarola ran through the gate.

You know, being a voice in a moral wilderness can be a lonely and discouraging experience. It's easy for fatigue and despair to set in. But many of you have felt the call to be that voice – like Savonarola, like John the Baptist – a voice in your family, at your school, where you work. If that's the case, and you're feeling faint and discouraged, feeling you can't go on, then I want to be that stranger and encourage you to get up and 'remember to do that for which God has sent you'.

So, in your pursuit to follow God's call on your life, be watchful for the particular dangers that the devil sets up for us: pride, egotism, envy, jealousy, competition, the drive for popularity, assumed infallibility, illusions of indispensability, and so forth. We all wrestle with these because we all long to be exalted. But this is the very reason the Holy Spirit has been given – so that He can have full control to exalt Christ through us. One man once prayed like this – "Reduce us and crush us, Lord.... so we can point to the Saviour better. Amen."

Let us pray.